

# First Tracks: A Qualitative Assessment of a Freshman Adventure Based Orientation Program

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*The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of the participants in the inaugural "First Tracks" freshman adventure based orientation. The program took place in the summer of 2002 at the Pingree Park Mountain Campus of Colorado State University. Activities included a low and high ropes course, an ascent of a 12,148-ft. mountain, and rock climbing. Twelve students took part in the program. The researchers personally observed and participated in all adventure activities and administered daily reflective journals. An additional reflective journal was administered three months after the program. Qualitative analysis of the journals identified emergent themes which aided in understanding the experiences of the participants.*

The self-assured high school graduate becoming a college freshman undergoes a period of great expectation and adjustment to college life. For many high school seniors, the thought of starting college generates a litany of fears and anxieties - life in the residence hall, making new friends, tests, papers, and 8 a.m. classes. As part of the pre-collegiate experience, orientation programs serve as a means for overcoming the awkward transition between home and school, high school and college, parental authority and peer influence. Orientation programs can arouse loyalties, inspire self-exploration, and bind a diverse group of students to campus (Twale, 1989). These programs are a vital link in the process of equipping first-year students with the tools necessary to begin their collegiate learning journey and transition smoothly into the college environment.

A well-designed orientation program aids students in their initial social and academic integration into an unfamiliar college or university environment. Successful orientation programs can have a positive influence on students' first-year social and academic integration. In turn, this dualistic integration can have a dramatic effect on student persistence and educational attainment (Fox, Zakely, Morris, & Jundt, 1993). Yet typical orientation programs are often short in duration, classroom-based and seldom experiential in nature.

Alternatives to traditional educational approaches are becoming more common in higher education settings (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996). One such alternative approach is the adventure based orientation. This type of program asks: What if incoming students were placed in an outdoor mountain setting as part of orientation? What would happen if students were challenged with individual and group tasks that provided an opportunity to test their physical and social limits? "First Tracks" is Colorado State University's attempt to offer such a challenge and opportunity.

### **Adventure Based Orientation**

An adventure based orientation model utilizes the theories of experiential learning and adventure education, combined with an outdoor setting to facilitate the process of acculturation into college life. Informal and relaxed, the outdoor experience bonds a group, aids in camaraderie and the formation of friendships, and facilitates an effective social adjustment to the campus (Twale, 1989). The use of adventure experiences in orientation provides an enhanced atmosphere in which to focus on the positive integration of students into the college environment (Gass, 1990).

### **Review of Literature**

The terms *adventure based orientation* and *wilderness orientation* are used synonymously in the review of literature. They both aim to accomplish the same outcomes, yet the chief difference is that wilderness orientation involves one or more nights spent in the wilderness. Despite the existence of wilderness and adventure based orientation programs since the 1960s, few articles have been published in the professional literature about these programs. A large portion of the literature on wilderness orientation programs is either unpublished or not published in refereed journals, limiting access to program information (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996). A review of wilderness orientation literature reveals a lack of cause-and-effect studies conducted to examine the impacts of wilderness orientation programs on factors such as student adjustment and retention. Until the 1990s, Gass (1987) was the leading researcher attempting to address the effects of adventure based orientation programming on college students. Conclusions drawn from later studies indicated that students who participated in outdoor orientation programs had better academic and

social adjustment rates than students who did not participate (Gass, 1990; Devlin, 1996; Brown, 1998).

These studies were longitudinal in nature, and found that students who participated in a wilderness or adventure based orientation program had significantly higher rates of retention than those participating in an on-campus program for the first year, and showed higher scores in areas of both personal and interpersonal development (Gass, 1990; Devlin, 1996; Brown, 1998). As a result of these limited findings, the effectiveness of wilderness orientation programs on long-term retention and adjustment efforts is still in question.

### **The First Tracks Program**

"First Tracks" is a three-night, four-day adventure based orientation program. The Pingree Park Mountain Campus of Colorado State University served as the host site. Pingree is located in a valley on the northern border of Rocky Mountain National Park at an elevation of 9,000 ft. The 2002 "pilot program" took place from June 28 through July 1. The cost of the program was \$250. "First Tracks" was jointly administered by the Outdoor Adventure Program and the Preview Orientation Office. The program brochure in part read:

The college experience lies ahead as a vast, unexplored landscape...join fellow incoming freshman students as we make "First Tracks" in this new terrain...activities are designed to challenge you and set a course for your transition into university life.

Each day, "First Tracks" challenged the students in different ways. The first day was spent traveling to Pingree Park and getting to know each other. The second day saw participants on the ropes course improving teamwork and later building self-confidence attempting the high ropes elements. The summit of Stormy Peaks (12,148 ft.) was the goal of the third day. The final day was spent rock climbing at Fish Creek followed by a closing activity in which students exchanged ceremonial pins.

The program goals are based primarily upon the social integration of students, but also aim to enhance the academic integration that begins in the on-campus orientation. The goals include: personal growth, by challenging oneself physically and emotionally; enhance self-confidence; learn to work with others, while developing positive peer

relationships; increase student retention; ease the transition into college life; exposure to the Rocky Mountain environment and Pingree Park; and have fun.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

A qualitative research design was used incorporating the personal observations of the researchers and individual reflective journals from the students. The researchers acted as instructors and were present throughout the program. All twelve participants signed consent forms and voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. Confidentiality was guaranteed through a code system where participants used the first letter of their mothers' name and the last two digits of their social security number. At the end of each day's activities, the students filled out a one page journal.

The daily reflective journals asked the following six questions: What was your high point of the day and why? What was your low point of the day and why? What surprised you about yourself today? What did you learn about yourself today? Describe how you feel toward the rest of the group? What are your thoughts and feelings about school in the fall?

### ***Data Source***

The volunteer participants who comprised the sample were all incoming freshmen scheduled to start school at Colorado State University in the Fall 2002 semester. Approximately half were non-residents of Colorado and all but one had attended the on-campus freshman orientation program prior to attending First Tracks. There were seven men and five women and all were 18 years of age at the time of the program.

### ***Data Analysis***

Reflective journals were transferred from the original form to typed word data files by the researchers. The information was coded in order to search for emergent themes, while retaining the original voices of the participants. The themes were compared and further analyzed seeking to understand the experience of the participants (Creswell, 1994). The constant comparative method (Patton, 1990) was used throughout this process to discover emerging themes. It should be noted that qualitative studies do not allow for generalizations to a larger population, although they do suggest comparisons to similar settings and contexts (Creswell, 1998).

## Findings

What follows are excerpts from daily participant journals used to discover emergent themes. These qualitative findings are presented in easy to read, chronological order. The Tuckman & Jensen (1977) group stage development model was used to explain group change throughout the program. One of the stages, forming, storming, norming, or performing represents each day.

It should be noted that the researchers took part in all the activities as facilitators/leaders. Personal observations and analysis of the daily participant journals were both used in attempting to better understand the experiences of the participants in the study.

### *First Tracks - Day One (Forming)*

The first day began at the Outdoor Adventure Program on Colorado State University's main campus. Prior to the van ride up to Pingree Park, icebreakers and group games aided students in getting to know each other. These activities continued throughout the afternoon. The evening slide show, a recent Mt. McKinley ascent by one of the program leaders, introduced the value of adventure and risk-taking. The reflective journals, filled out that night, covering the first day of the program contained several interesting themes; one being how individuals were perceived by others in the group. One participant wrote:

During the van ride up [to Pingree], I wasn't sure what to expect and what the other kids would be like. Not everyone was talking and I didn't know if they would accept me.

In answering the question "What surprised you about yourself today?" many wrote how they openly shared personal information attempting to form friendships early in the program:

I was surprised at how open I was with the group.  
I was bolder than usual about my faith.  
I was amazed at how real I was. I am not acting false.

The emergent theme of bonding reflects the first stage of the Group Stage Development Model (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). This process called "forming" takes place as

individuals feel out the group and how they fit in. It is often an ambiguous and insecure time. Each student attempted to find commonality with others. What kind of music do you like? What are your favorite sports? What residence hall are you going to be living in?

Journals also reflected an initial positive feeling toward the rest of the group:

The group is full of cool people, who represent diverse interests. By being in contact with others, it helps you learn about yourself.

I think this is a good bunch and I look forward to working with others. I learned how unique everyone is. It has been nice to meet people from different states.

Several individuals shared concerns about group dynamics:

We are getting to know each other better and becoming ourselves. Some people still have insecurities.

There are a couple of kids I don't like. I think they are show-offs. Other than those few kids, I think we will get along well.

Concerning classes and school in the fall, many shared fears about the transition to college:

I'm looking forward to learning and classes and meeting new friends. I'm also worried about losing old friends and hoping I can find a talent and excel in some way.

I am excited about college but I am also really nervous. It is going to be a test of my character. I think this [First Tracks] will help with college because I'll know people and I'll already have an experience with college people.

The first day of the program challenged individuals to make connections with people they had never met before. The beautiful mountain environment of Pingree Park, sleeping in the dormitory, eating in the dining hall, and forming new friendships was novel and exciting.

### ***First Tracks - Day Two (Storming)***

The second day of the program was spent on the challenge ropes course. The first half of the day consisted of low ropes and team building activities. The group was challenged to work on communication, trust, and leadership. It was discovered early on that certain participants were more process-oriented while others focused on the task.

Multiple leaders surfaced at different times according to changing tasks and situations. Frustrations mounted as the challenges presented to the group became more involved. The group's low point was reflected in the journals that evening:

[My low point was] when the communication broke down during the Nitro Exercise.

The low point was when we were doing the low elements and everyone was getting mad at everyone else; no one was communicating.

[My low point was] when the group wasn't listening to each other. I didn't get to share my feelings and ideas on what to do.

The low point was bickering with the group when trying to cross the cavern, not having my ideas heard.

Later that day, the high elements tested individual limits. Students were fitted into climbing harnesses and helmets and were safety belayed. Each element offered a different challenge, but all put the students at least 27 feet off the ground. Two classic high elements are the Catwalk and the Leap of Faith. The Catwalk is a narrow rounded log demanding good balance as one walks across. The Leap of Faith requires the participant to climb up a vertical pole, and then stand on top. After a moment to catch their breath and take in the view the participant counts to three and jumps for a trapeze six feet away.

The systems are safe, but that does little to alleviate the perceived danger. The challenge by choice rule is stressed, meaning no one is forced or coerced into attempting anything they do not want to do. There were many opportunities for the students to get outside their comfort zones. Encouraging words from those on the ground supported efforts above.

The students gained confidence that afternoon as they progressed through the high elements. According to Bandura (1997), successfully completing a difficult task or coping with a challenging situation increases individual self-efficacy. All of Bandura's techniques for raising efficacy expectations, such as success experiences, observational learning, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal come into play on the high elements (Bandura, 1977). Increased self-efficacy was evident among participants after the high elements. What emerged from their evening journals was a belief that anything is possible:

I was surprised by my courage in doing the high ropes elements, and by my faith in the people supporting me on the ground.

I learned that if you trust yourself and tell yourself you aren't scared, and think positive, you can do things you didn't think you could.

I did the trapeze jump after I knew how afraid I was. I confronted that fear.

The evening program topic was the academic reality of being a student at Colorado State University. Scenarios related to academic life were presented to the group and discussed. It was a wake up call for many as reflected in their journal entries:

I'm so excited, but I'm kind of nervous about the workload and what the classes and professors will be like.

I need to be more disciplined with time management to have as much success as I imagined.

I am worried about failure, but I know I can do it and I am relieved to have had this experience to ease my way into college life.

By the end of the second day the group was struggling to work as a team. Most individuals were experiencing the "storming" stage of the group development model. The short-lived "honeymoon" period that takes place during the forming stage of the model was evolving through the challenges of the low ropes. According to Tuckman's model, storming is the stage where group conflict plays out. It is a time when personalities come into conflict often around leadership issues (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The journal entries for the day reflected the struggle:

I feel good toward most of them. One person in particular is very annoying, but that's about it.

They all seem to be taking this seriously. They are all going hardcore and I just want to have fun.

I was frustrated earlier when we were doing the [Nitro-Crossing] low element and everyone was saying that whatever was going wrong was somebody else's fault.

The challenge of developing as a functioning team while experiencing the storming period was apparent during and after the low ropes. Who were the leaders of the group? In what situations did the leadership role move between individuals? Personality differences and individual communication styles were now in direct conflict. Yet successes on the high ropes course elements had bolstered the self-efficacy of many of the students. They felt good about themselves, but as to how they worked as a team,

questions remained. The next day would challenge the group to summit Stormy Peaks. It would require teamwork, effective communication, good judgment, and a major physical effort by each student.

### *First Tracks - Day Three (Norming)*

The group departed from the dining hall at 7:30 am for 12,148 ft. high Stormy Peaks. Throughout the morning students walked in small groups along the well-marked trail. Nearing the top, the group encountered large boulders that had to be negotiated before reaching the actual summit. The pace had been moderate and everyone made the summit. After signing the register and taking in the views, a group photo was taken before the long descent back to Pingree. It was a long day covering nine miles, going up 3,000 vertical feet, and taking nine hours to complete.

The journals that evening reflected the high spirits of the team. Three themes emerged from the day's peak ascent: pride in the accomplishment of making the summit, exceeding expectations and pushing physical limits.

[My high point] was the summit. I was impressed that everyone pulled through. When we reached the summit I just felt so good after the hard climb. Reaching the top and having a sense of great accomplishment.

Many of the students exceeded their personal expectations:

[I was surprised that] I didn't get as tired as I thought I would. I was in front almost the whole way. I was expecting to be in the back the entire time.  
[Today I learned that] I can do more than I think I can.  
If I push myself hard enough I can finish anything.

The physical pain of pushing one's body to the top of the mountain was also reflected in that night's journal entries:

[My low point was] the pain and soreness of muscles. Getting sunburned and having a headache.  
Coming down the mountain with no water, blisters, basically just the dead tired feeling and having to keep moving.

The peak ascent allowed the group to move beyond their storming stage. During the long hike up students had a chance to reflect and talk about the lack of teamwork the

day before. The "norming" stage is highlighted by the group agreeing on rules of behavior. These agreed upon rules or norms, allow for a greater sense of order and cohesion (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The first trackers had all made it to the top of the mountain. This success experience not only raised their individual self-efficacy, it gave them confidence as a group and a new focus. They were working as a team and functioning at a new level.

### *First Tracks - Day Four (Performing)*

The final day of the program began with tired students organizing their belongings, cleaning their rooms and plodding to the dining hall for breakfast. From an observational standpoint, there was no doubt that the climb had taken its toll on everyone's energy level. The group left Pingree and drove down the road to the Fish Creek Rock Climbing Site. The main rock cliff is about 75 ft. high. All the climbs are top roped with anchors at the top, with the climber and belayer starting at the bottom. Three routes were set up, ranging from moderate to difficult. The students had climbing shoes, helmets, harnesses and some had climbing chalk. About a third of the group had climbed before. It was obvious that the low energy was affecting the outcome, yet teamwork was evident through encouraging verbal support and many of the students made it to the top of a climb. Later, when writing in the journal, two students felt it was the high point of the day:

[My high point of the day was] when I reached the top of the climb and everyone was cheering for me. It made me feel so awesome.  
When I was in the middle of my climb and I got stuck and wanted to stop. Somehow I kept going and made it to the top. It was an amazing feeling of accomplishment.

The most powerful emergent theme reflected in the final journals was the concept of feeling good through the success of others. This was another example of how the group was performing as a team. Prior to the last day, the focus was more on individual success and failure. Examples of this transformation included:

I was surprised at how I encouraged others and we accomplished things.  
I learned that I can help and encourage others to success.  
I learned that I love helping others do things I can do.

After climbing the students wrote a letter to themselves that would be returned to them in three months. The students were asked to reflect on the program for the purpose of transferring the lessons learned. The pin ceremony, modeled after Colorado Outward Bound, was the concluding event of First Tracks. Each student presented a CSU pin to another student. When presenting the pin, they shared what they thought were the best qualities of that student. This ceremony provided closure for the group process. For many it was the highlight of the day:

[High point] the pin ceremony. It was great to have everyone reflect and give positive feedback to each other.

The pin ceremony. I felt good about myself and loved seeing the group get along so well.

Everyone felt good about the group on the last day. The adventure activities had tested the new bonds and friendships:

I love this group. On the first day somebody said they felt that everyone was good deep inside. I believe this weekend proved that to be true.

I feel really good about the group. Everyone was supporting each other and I know this helped me.

Finally, participant feelings concerning school in the fall were positive:

I can't wait to move in and start cracking. I have some plans for myself. I also know that there will be tough challenging times and once I get through those everything is ok.

I am really excited now that I know some people. I think that is going to help. I'm looking forward to the pizza party and reunion in the fall.

The final day of the program was another chance to test individual limits. The climbs were difficult and most of the group was pushed outside their comfort zones. Yet they worked well together, as a cohesive, high-functioning unit. They had moved to the "performing" stage of the Tuckman & Jensen model on Stormy Peaks. They carried the success of the peak climb to the rock cliffs.

### ***First Tracks - Three Months Later***

Three months after the end of First Tracks the instructors hosted a gathering at the Outdoor Adventure Program Office on the main CSU campus. Ten of the twelve

students attended. For some it was the first time seeing each other since Pingree. The group ate pizza, reflected, laughed, shared stories and watched a slide show of the four days in July. Afterwards each person filled out a final reflective journal. Three months had passed since the First Tracks program, but with all the excitement of starting college there was still a buzz in the group.

The high points of the whole program were the peak ascent, ropes course and getting to know the other students. Journal examples include:

[High point] the summit of the mountain and getting to meet so many people.  
The peak ascent because it was such an accomplishment.  
The ropes course because it was the most fun.  
Accomplishing personal goals and "stepping outside the comfort zone."

Students remembered the successes and value of risk taking:

Fear is all that limits me and holds me back.  
Taking a risk is worth the small chance of failure.  
I can do more than I think I can. I can keep going after I think I can't.  
Keep pushing myself one step at a time and I will make the summit.

Positive feelings were strong within the group. Examples were:

They are a great bunch of people. They are a good bunch of friends.  
We are all great friends. I know I can talk to them if I need to.  
I have grown to be close friends with a few. The others I would probably know but didn't get to because of time and different schedules.

When prompted to write about how the program helped them transition into school in the fall the dominant theme was positive - that First Tracks was beneficial for preparing students for the academic and social stresses of the freshman year in college. They wrote:

It gave me the confidence to meet new people. It gave me friends that were going to school with me.  
It helped me socially and gave me academic tips and it was fun.  
It was cool when I saw people I knew before school started. I could say "yea, we go way back."  
I think it helped my perseverance, on wanting to keep going, when we were on the mountain.

## Summary

Adventure based orientation programs provide incoming students with the opportunity to cultivate peer group connections, positively interact with faculty and staff in an informal atmosphere, and challenge themselves to grow toward their full potential through immersion in adventure experiences. They offer the added benefit of extended social integration and community building that a short on-campus orientation cannot accomplish. A greater degree of social involvement can lead to an improved sense of satisfaction, and in turn contribute to an increase in student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Adventure based orientation programs grant access to the ultimate setting to address, consider, and process the "college as adventure" metaphor.

The First Tracks adventure based orientation program presented students with unique challenges and opportunities. Throughout the four days the students confronted fears, tested physical limits, and had numerous opportunities to raise self-efficacy through rock climbing, mountain climbing and the challenge ropes course. During the four-day experience the group moved through the stages of the Tuckman & Jensen group development model. From forming to performing they never seemed to lose track of the reasons they had come to Pingree. They stepped out of their comfort zones, made friendships, had fun and took initial steps toward understanding college life and Colorado State University.

Among all the themes to emerge from this study, perhaps the most interesting was how these students turned their focus from personal to group success. As they grew to know each other they began to care about each other. By the end of the program students were supporting the risks, failures and achievements of others.

Only time will tell what roads the twelve students will take through their college careers. Four days in the Colorado Mountains taking on individual and group challenges will plant a seed for future growth. Making personal connections and new friendships at such an impressionable time is perhaps the greatest benefit of First Tracks. The twelve students took what they learned to campus where they will continue to be challenged throughout their university experience.

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